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Poetic Performance: Script and Voice

Sabine Hänsgen

Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov belonged to a literary and artistic counter-public that emerged in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union beyond the reach of the state culture system and developed its own forms of aesthetic existence. Known as *samizdat*, this encompassed not only finished artworks but also the process of the works' production, presentation, and discussion. Literary texts not authorized by the state censorship were circulated in handwritten and typewritten copies; the typewritten manuscript was one of *samizdat's* chief production and distribution mediums. In addition to typescript literature, the unofficial cultural milieu attached particular importance to the oral recitation of poems in front of a close-knit audience of friends—poets, artists, theorists, and critics.

In the following, the reciprocal relationship between script and voice in the poetic performance of Dmitry Prigov will be examined from the media-theoretical perspective. The writing praxis of *samizdat* has already received considerable attention within the framework of various exhibition projects.¹ The presentation of the poetry by way of poets' readings and oral performances, however, has hitherto been a neglected subject.

The death of one of the leading representatives of the unofficial Moscow culture scene raises the question as to how the special media/performance-based forms of literature and art in *samizdat* can be and were passed down to posterity—forms presupposing the storage and collection of text, sound, and video documents in a form other than the Gutenberg-style book.

To this day, the book can be considered the prevailing medium by which culture is passed down, the form that ensures the survival of texts through the ages, and allows their study, interpretation, and reinterpretation by later generations. The transient character of the voice leads to uncertainty in this form of tradition formation because—even before any suspicion of metaphysical presence arises—the vocal event, like the performance, means above all an ephemeral presence, already announces its own fading, its passing, and ultimately its own absence. We are reminded of this in a particularly painful

¹ See, among others, Hirt and Wonders 1998.

manner when we hear the voice of a dead person we knew well when that person was still alive.



In the 1920s, in the context of the Russian avant-garde and Formalism, pioneering research was carried out on the oral recitation of poetry. What I find interesting here is how the relationship between the image of the text on the page and its oral recitation is conceived. Are the two forms of poetry's existence equal, or can we detect the dominance of one or the other?

In his investigations of the "melody of Russian lyric poetry," Boris Eikhenbaum considered oral recitation not from the traditional point of view of the aesthetics of expression—in other words, he did not examine the expression of the reciter in the audible word—but on the contrary inquired into how the text structure appearing in the written text could be adequately reproduced in the recitation. In his opinion, the process of reading aloud was to direct the listener's attention to the text and provide him/her with a means of comprehending its formal properties and experiencing them aesthetically (Eikhenbaum 1969a). In the following deliberations, the relationship between the image of the written text and its oral recitation, which according to Eikhenbaum should be determined by the text structure, will be discussed from various perspectives, including that of Moscow Conceptualism.

As I would like to analyze above all the beginnings of Prigov's poetry performance in the intimate situation of the unofficial culture and its members, a second aspect of Eikhenbaum's work is also enlightening for my endeavor: his differentiation between what he calls stage declamation (*estradnaia deklamatsiia*) and chamber declamation (*kamernaia deklamatsiia*). By his definition, stage declamation is designed to reach a large audience in a theater auditorium effectively by sensitively conveying certain situations. Chamber declamation, on the other hand, is conducive to the acoustic realization of the text as it appears on the page. As for the recitation of poems, Eikhenbaum spoke out against the *expressive* stage declamation of professional actors. He considered the poets themselves to be most qualified to recite their poems in chamber declamation form because they had not undergone special speech training. His ideal was not the master but the dilettante of declamation. Eikhenbaum considered the soft, monotone recitation style of Aleksandr Blok the perfect manifestation of chamber declamation:

I clearly remember the impression made on me by Blok's declamation at the commemorative evening for V. Komissarzhevskaiia in 1910. Blok recited his poem "On the Death of V. Komissarzhevskaiia" ("She Came at Midnight")—and for the first time I did not experience the sense of awkwardness and embarrassment provoked in me by all "expressive" readers. Blok read in a hollow monotone, virtually word for word,

pausing only at the end of a line of verse. But as a result, I perceived the text of the poem and experienced it the way I wanted to experience it. I had the feeling that the poem was being *offered* to me, and not *staged* for me. The reciter helped me rather than disturbing me by “co-experiencing” the text in the manner of an actor—I heard the words of the poem and its movement. [...] From then on, I began to concern myself with the issue of poetry recitation itself.

Я резко помню впечатление, произведенное на меня декламацией А. Блока на вечере в память В. Комиссаржевской в 1910 году. Блок читал свое стихотворение “На смерть Комиссаржевской” (“Пришла порою полуночной”) — и я впервые не испытывал чувства неловкости, смущения и стыда, которое неизменно вызывали во мне все “выразительные” декламаторы. Блок читал глухо, монотонно, как-то отдельными словами, ровно, делая паузы только после концов строк. Но благодаря этому я воспринимал текст стихотворения и переживал его так, как мне хотелось. Я чувствовал, что стихотворение мне *подается*, а не *разыгрывается*. Чтец мне помогал, а не мешал, как актер со своими “переживаниями”, — я слышал слова стихотворения и его движения. [...] Тогда же стал меня беспокоить и сам вопрос о произнесении стихов. (Eikhenbaum 1969b, 514)²

Aleksandr Blok’s restrained recitation style—characterized, as it was, by minor variations in intonation—likewise served Sergei Bernshtein as a model (Bernshtein 1972, 454–525).³ He described the particular way in which Blok’s voice shook, causing constant interruptions in the sound, which was moreover partially drowned out by noise. In fact, when listening to phonographic recordings it is often extremely difficult to distinguish his voice from the technical noise of the equipment. For Bernshtein, Blok belonged to the category of poet whose poems do not necessarily require acoustic realization. He proceeded on the assumption that Blok’s poems emerged on paper from a writing process influenced, if at all, by very abstract acoustic ideas. On the basis of these observations, the conclusion Bernshtein came to in his investigation of Eikhenbaum’s text-centered research was that oral recitation should be analyzed as an independent aesthetic form.

² On Eikhenbaum’s research, also see Julia Kursell, especially the chapters “Deklamation” (206–29), “Hören im Formalismus: Boris Eichenbaum” (233–49), and “Monotone Deklamation” (250–59).

³ The text, published in Tartu in 1972, had already been written in 1921 and submitted for printing in 1928. At the time, Bernshtein’s scholarly work was subjected to cultural-political criticism: he was accused of formalist tendencies and his work was never carried to completion. His book *The Voices of Poets (Golosa poetov)* was never published.

Inspired by German aural philology, for example Eduard Sievers's investigations of the vocal sound, rhythm, and melody of speech (Sievers 1912), Bernshtein developed his "theory of sonorous artistic speech" (*teoriia zvuchashchei khudozhestvennoi rechi*) at the Institute of the Living Word (Institut zhivogo slova) and later at the Institute of the History of the Arts (Gosudarstvennyi institut istorii iskusstv) in Petrograd and Leningrad, respectively.⁴ The strong practical relevance of his theoretical proposals can serve today as a stimulus for research on the *samizdat* milieu, the scholarly investigation of which is likewise necessarily to be linked with intensive documentation activities. In the 1920s Bernshtein set up a sound library encompassing recordings of the declamation styles of poets and writers, actors and professional reciters (*chtetsy*) on 250 cylinders (including 60 copies) as the basis of his studies (Brang 1988, 11).⁵

Authors' readings were highly valued by aural philologists, because they perceived in them a means of bringing to life poetic texts ossified in written form. This may have been what prompted Bernshtein to produce and archive phonographic recordings. At the same time, however, he dissociated himself from the assertions of aural philology. He was, for example, not of the opinion that instructions for the performance of a poetic text were unequivocally inscribed in that text; he regarded a poem's oral form of existence as equal to its written form. Independently of the printed version of the text, he therefore subjected the recorded sound material to a systematic analysis concerned with the formation of the timbre, the modulation of the individual sounds, and the subdivision of the text with the aid of rests, as well as with dynamic and temporal aspects of the language. He differentiated between the declamatory artwork (*deklamatsionnoe proizvedenie*) and the poetic artwork (*stikhotvornoe proizvedenie*), and between the declamatory type (*deklamatsionnyi tip*) of poet, who in his artistic work strives for a materialization of sound, and the non-declamatory type (*nedeklamatsionnyi tip*), whose poems arise from visual-graphic conceptions.

From this outline of the historical concepts developed in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century we will now turn our attention to reflections on the relationship between script and voice in the current media-theory debate. Under the influence of philosophical Deconstructivism's theory of writing, the voice—as an expression of presence and meaning—was long suspected of metaphysicality. In his *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida aimed at

⁴ See Bernshtein's three fundamental works of the 1920s: "Sonorous Artistic Speech and Its Study" ("Zvuchashchaia khudozhestvennaia rech' i ee izuchenie"); "Aesthetic Premises for the Theory of Declamation" ("Esteticheskie predposylki teorii deklamatsii"); and "Verse and Declamation" ("Stikh i deklamatsiia").

⁵ In his study, Brang provides a detailed overview of Russian research on the oral recitation of poetry. On Bernshtein's phonographic recordings of Blok's voice and their restoration in the 1960s, see Shilov 2004, 139–60. Bernshtein's recordings were made accessible to a larger circle of recipients through their release on Melodiia records. See also the recent dissertation on Sergei Bernshtein (Schmidt 2015).

the emancipation of written text from its function as a subordinate “notation system” for the spoken word. He regarded the voice as an embodiment of the tradition of logo- and phonocentrism, which he criticized:

In every case the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing. All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense [...]. This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning. (Derrida 11–12)

In recent years, this bias towards script has in turn been called into question by new research that takes the voice as its orientation (see especially Kolesch and Krämer). This approach regards the Deconstructivist theory of the written text as a further manifestation of the dominance of the sense of sight in the culture of the Occident, and identifies a scholarly tradition in which, in the primacy of the visual, a unifying element is perceived between the *linguistic turn* and the *iconic turn*. The cultural-scientific renaissance of the voice and the emerging interest in acoustic phenomena, on the other hand, are motivated by a reorientation towards the performative. A shift of perspective from self-contained works and finished texts to processes of production and reception is taking place. The focus is now on performance situations and their perception by the participants. In this context, the voice acts as a threshold phenomenon between body and language, soma and semantics, *aisthesis* and *logos*.



Against the background of these preliminary media-theoretical considerations, I would now like to take a closer look at the relationship between script and voice in Dmitry Prigov’s poetic performance. Prigov himself programmatically characterized his *oeuvre* as a comprehensive aesthetic project evolving on the boundary between various media and art genres, between high and trivial culture, between avant-gardist and traditional forms:

[...] the project, which represents a certain temporal continuity full of various acts and gestures, which serve as points on the trajectory of the artist revealing himself in culture within time limits, which are sometimes equal to life. The project, therefore, can last a lifetime. In this respect, the project does not completely differentiate between such radical activities as performance, action, and various computerized ex-

periments, on the one hand, and simple traditional drawing, writing of rhymed poems, or painting.

[...] проект, представляющий собой некую временную протяженность, заполненную разнообразными актами и жестами, имеющими значение отметок на траектории проявления художника в культуре во временных пределах, иногда равных жизни. Т.е. проект длиной в жизнь. В этом отношении проект вообще снимает различие между такими радикальными действиями как перформанс, акция и всяческие компьютерные опыты, с одной стороны, и простым традиционным рисованием, писанием рифмованных стихов или живописанием. (Prigov 2001, 324–26)

By thus emphasizing the project, the act and the gesture, Prigov reflects on the myth of the text that is so essential to Russian culture. Up until modernity, the written text had a prominent cultural status in Russia: the traditional religious conception of text led to a pronounced hierarchization of culture that was exploited again and again by the political powers-that-be to serve their own interests.⁶ At the forefront was a canonical group of authoritative texts—some of religious, some of literary, and some of ideological character—and state censorship subjected text production to a strict system of exclusion and inclusion.⁷

Dmitry Prigov, who was excluded from the official Soviet publication channels, made art objects of his handwritten and typewritten texts, which then circulated in *samizdat*. In the environment of Soviet culture with its authoritative conception of the written text, the handmade, handcrafted aspect of *samizdat* books, their downright archaic production techniques, possessed a certain critical potency. After all, the concern was with displaying the *manipulability* of texts—not only in the linguistic, but also in the physical-material dimension.⁸ Prigov's typographic experiments with visual poetry developed from a process of writing, copying by hand, and copying by typewriter—and this represents a non-declamatory tendency in his oeuvre.

Continuing the tradition of sound poetry, *Lautpoesie*, *poésie sonore*, and acoustic art of the postwar era,⁹ Prigov also made inroads into the musical and performing arts with his oral recitation of poems. The declamatory tendency of his oeuvre is characterized by his focus on the materialization of

⁶ Anna Al'chuk emphasized the political significance of Prigov's deconstruction of the religious role played by literature in Russian culture (Al'chuk 2008, 108–14).

⁷ See Berg 2000, especially the chapter "On the Status of Literature" ("O statuse literatury"), 180–230.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see Hirt and Wonders 2008.

⁹ For a fundamental investigation that handles a wealth of empirical material from a theoretical perspective, see Lentz 2000.

sound, where he was building on the Russian avant-garde's emotive-oratorical type of poetic speech. Vladimir Mayakovsky's "intonatory" poetry played a significant role here—a kind of poem which, drawing from the style of political public speech, was intended for reading aloud, "for the voice" (Maia-kovskii 1923).

Prigov himself thought of his poetic oeuvre as one determined by an oscillation between two poles:

Even if it is not open and manifest, both principles—at least in reduced form—quite self-evidently underlie the actualization of language through the act of speaking or graphic-literal fixation. Yes, and indeed every act of poetic expression always oscillates between these two extreme poles—between sonority and graphicity—and finally accumulates in the virtual realm of meaning.

Понятно, что неоткровенно и неманифестированно, в редуцированном виде и то и другое лежит в самой актуализации языка через акт говорения или графическо-буквенного запечатления. Да и вообще, каждый акт поэтического высказывания как бы все время мерцает между двумя этими крайними полюсами—сонорность и графичность—аккумулируясь, в результате, в виртуальной области смысла. (Prigov 2001, 325)

From a myriad of possible examples, I would like to discuss a number of sound and video documents of performances by Dmitry Prigov in whose production we ourselves were involved.¹⁰ It should be pointed out here that a large amount of material (in addition to the solo performances in which Prigov recited his poetic texts, there are also his joint performances with other poets, musicians, performance artists, translators, etc.) still awaits more in-depth analysis.¹¹

In a situation quite different from that of solitary, silent reading, recitation places it in the situational context of perception by an audience. Facial expression, gestures, and above all the timbre, intensity, and rhythm of the

¹⁰ The audio and video recordings realized jointly with Georg Witte and analyzed in this article have been published in the following editions: Hirt and Wonders 1984 and 1987; Prigov 1989.

¹¹ See, among others, the CD recordings of D. A. Prigov's joint performances with other musicians: *Prigov Pekarskii Rubinshtein*, Moscow: Otdelenie VYKhOD, 1990; Vladimir Tarasov and Dmitry Prigov, *KANTATOS*, Vilnius: Sonore Records, 1993; *Tri "O" i odin D. A. Prigov*, Moscow: CHOR Music, Pentagramma 21, 2001. In Vadim Zakharov's video archive, along with a large number of other documentations, is a recording of a performance by Prigov, Natal'ia Pshenichnikova, and German Vinogradov, Essen, 2000. On Prigov's collaboration with German musicians, see *dmitrij prigov/markus aust featuring rochus aust/stefan bitterle: alphabete*, Cologne: Chez Muziek, 2002.

voice enter the limelight of attention. In this situation, the voice as a vestige of the body can develop a potential for subversion and transgression all its own (see Kolesch and Krämer 2006, 7–15). It serves not only as a medium for meaningful statements, but—depending on how the work is recited—can also comment on the text’s meaning, contradict, or even undermine it. In the process of speaking, in the transitional zone between unarticulated sounds and phonetic units of meaning, a pre-symbolic dimension becomes perceivable above and beyond the meaning of the spoken text. A reciprocal relationship evolves between the sign dimension and the dimension of affects, which evades exhaustive control. The tension between language’s claim to order, artistic control, and the guarantee of meaning, on the one hand, and the unleashing of affects, the ecstatic release, on the other, is especially manifest in Prigov’s screamed recitations of his poetic *Alphabets* (*Azbuki*). These are a series comprising more than a hundred texts in which textual, visual, and tonal effects overlap. In the “48th Alphabet,” the crossing of the threshold to music and dramatic performance is virtually demonstrated, even without the actual participation of other persons. The jazz musician Vladimir Tarasov, with whom Prigov frequently performed, appears here as a figure in the text:

A-a-a-a-a – sing we in the space of liiiiiiimitless fields
 Bu-bu-bu-bu – they answer us from their dark liquid steaming bowels
 Vai-vai-vai-vaaaats! – we turn to the sky – vai-vai-vai – our faces and
 unclear souls –
 vai! – quivering together in quivers
 Gy-gy-gy-gy – they answer us / Tarasov, strike something bdyzn of
 some kind – bdyznnn! – Good! /
 Da-da-da-da-daaaaa – we run away from ourselves (bum-bum-
 bummm – it confirms!
 Ei-ei-ei-eeeeeei – bum-bum-bummm – expand the surroundings–
 bummm! – the surroundings expand – bummm!¹²

The field of media theory has recently discovered the voice as a formula of pathos, a figure of the afterlife, the echo of cultic and religious elements of past centuries. Particularly Sigrid Weigel (2006) has—with reference to Aby Warburg—examined the opera voice as a pathos formula that makes affect cultures of the past audible once again. The significance that opera held for Prigov is mirrored in his tremendous interest in Richard Wagner. And as in opera, Prigov’s voice develops its true impact on the boundary between the singing voice and the speaking voice. Prigov plays out vocalic elements to achieve the musical quality of the poetry recitation—the quality that brings the sound of the voice as such to bear. The stressed vowels are stretched and

¹² Quoted from the typescript. For a publication of this alphabet in Russian, see the website <http://www.prigov.ru/bukva/azbuka48.php> (accessed 10 August 2015) and the audio recording on the audio cassette Prigov 1989.

А-а-а-а-а-а – поем мы на просто-
 рах полей бескра-а-а-айных
 Бу-бу-бу-бу – отвечают нам они
 темные из недр своих жидких
 вздымающихся
 Вай-вай-вай-ваааац – обращаем мы
 к небу – вай-вай-вай- лица
 свои и души неясные – вай! –
 дрожью содрагаемые
 Гы-гы-гы-гы-гы – отвечают они
 нам / Тарасов, ударь что-нибудь
 бдзынь какое-нибудь – бдзыиний!
 – Хорошо!/
 Да-да-да-дааааа – убегаем мы от
 себя /бум-бум-буммм – подтвр-
 ждает!
 Ей-ей-ей-еееееей – бум-бум-буммм
 –полнятся окрестности – буммм!-
 окрестности полнятся – буммм!-

emphasized by vibrato. At the same time, the volume swells and ebbs and certain patterns of intonation are repeated at various pitches, often with increasing vehemence.

Traces of past affective cultures are many and varied in Prigov's oeuvre. He himself addressed this topic in one of his metatexts:

And for the attentive listener the archetypes of incantations, ecstasies, song-singing, etc. emerge in slogans, summons, holiday rejoicing, and street fights, the structuring pathos of which, filtering into modernity, is unfalse and life-supporting.

И для внимательного прислушивателя в лозунгах, призывах, праздничных ликованиях, уличных сварах проступают архетипы

заклинаний, экстазов, песнопений и т.д., структурообразующий пафос которых, прорастая сквозь нашу современность, неложен и жизнестоек.¹³

In his famous *Kikimora-Cry* (*Krik kikimory*),¹⁴ which was inspired by a female figure from Slavic folklore, Prigov makes a purely performative gesture—a long, high, ecstatic scream that gradually transforms into laughter. In his *Gospel Incantations* (*Evangel'skie zaklinaniia*), a performative gesture of this kind—now a kind of chant—enters into a reciprocal relationship with the semantics of the recited text series, which evokes a number of biblical scenes, one after another:

Gospel Incantations I. Cross

Cross
Cross horrible
Cross horrible heavy
Cross horrible heavy beyond human strength
Cross horrible heavy beyond human strength heavy
Cross horrible heavy beyond human strength heavy
cross
Horrible heavy beyond human strength heavy
horrible cross
Heavy beyond human strength heavy horrible cross
Beyond human strength heavy horrible cross
Heavy horrible cross
Horrible cross
Cross

II. Garden of Gethsemane

My father I ask that you take away or let pass this cup
I ask that take away or let pass this cup
Take away or let pass this cup
Let pass this cup
Pass this cup
This cup
Cup

¹³ D. A. Prigov, "General Prenotification" ("Obshee predvedomlenie") (Prigov [1980] 1996, 8).

¹⁴ An audio recording can be found on the web at <http://www.prigov.ru/bukva/kikimora.php> (accessed 10 August 2015).

Cup which
 Cup which for me
 Cup which for me is too much
 Cup which for me is too much to drink as is for a person
 Which for me is too much to drink as is for a person
 To drink as is for a person
 As is for a person
 Person
 Person born
 Person born to suffer
 Person born to suffer but not to bear
 Born to suffer but not to bear
 To suffer but not to bear
 Suffer but not to bear
 Not to bear
 Bear

3. Last Supper

Bur... stop! – bur... stop! – burning candle
 Whi... stop! – whi... stop! – white tablecloth
 Sa... stop! – sa... stop! – sat people
 Ami... stop! – ami... stop! – amid them the teacher
 Silen... stop! – silen... stop! – silent people
 Silen... stop! – silen... stop! – silent teacher
 Silen... stop! – silen... stop! – silent night
 Silen... stop! – silen... stop! – silent abyss
 Silen... stop! – silen... stop! – silent also He
 Silent also he

The *Gospel Incantations* exist in two concrete forms of realization—one for the eye and one for the ear. The visual poetry of the typographical figurations emerging on the page from the writing or typing process, i.e., of the expanding and then contracting lines of text, corresponds with the swelling and subsiding of the vocal intensity during the oral recitation of the poem. The process of converging with and then diverging from the intonational patterns of the evocation formulas (reminiscent of the chant used in the Russian Orthodox liturgy) during the performance reveals that Prigov's concern was with the acquisition of a cultural tradition by way of intonation.

Евангельские заклинания

I. Крест

Крест
 Крест ужасный
 Крест ужасный тяжелый
 Крест ужасный тяжелый не по людским силам
 Крест ужасный тяжелый не по людским силам тяжелый
 Крест ужасный тяжелый не по людским силам тяжелый
 ужасный крест
 Ужасный тяжелый не по людским силам тяжелый
 ужасный крест
 Тяжелый не по людским силам тяжелый ужасный крест
 Не по людским силам тяжелый ужасный крест
 Тяжелый ужасный крест
 Ужасный крест
 Крест

2. Гефсиманский сад

Отей мой прошу уберечь или мимо пронеси эту чашу
 Прошу уберечь или мимо пронеси эту чашу
 Уберечь или мимо пронеси эту чашу
 Мимо пронеси эту чашу
 Пронеси эту чашу
 Эту чашу
 Чашу
 Чашу которую
 Чашу которую мне
 Чашу которую мне не по силам
 Чашу которую мне не по силам испить как есть
 человеку
 Которую мне не по силам испить как есть человеку
 Не по силам испить как есть человеку
 Испить как есть человеку
 Как есть человеку
 Человеку
 Человеку рожденному
 Человеку рожденному чтобы страдать
 Человеку рожденному чтобы страдать но не терпеть
 Рожденному чтобы страдать но не терпеть
 Чтобы страдать но не терпеть
 Страдать но не терпеть
 Не терпеть
 Терпеть

3. Тайная вечеря

Горе... стой! - горе... стой! - горела свечка
 Беде... стой! - беде... стой! - белая слатерть
 Сиде... стой! - сиде... стой! - сидели люди
 Посреди... стой! - посреди... стой! - посредине
 учителе
 Молча... стой! - молча... стой! - молчали люди
 Молча... стой! - молча... стой! - молчал учитель
 Молча... стой! - молча... стой! - молчала ночь
 Молча... стой! - молча... стой! - молчала звезды
 Молча... стой! - молча... стой! - молчала бездна
 Молча... стой! - молча... стой! - молчал и Он
 Молчал и он

Prigov's recitations of the first stanza of Aleksandr Pushkin's epic poem *Eugene Onegin* (*Evgenii Onegin*)—"My uncle of the most honorable rules..." (*Moi diadia samykh chestnykh pravil...*), which he referred to as a "mantra of high Russian culture"—came to enjoy particular popularity. Prigov performed this mantra in very different styles—Buddhist, Muslim, Orthodox, Chinese, etc. With his voice he acted out various intonational clichés, thus uncovering the cultural imprint of the intonation, which he regarded not as pure expression, but as a prescribed pattern.¹⁵

The video recording of a reading by Prigov from the *Apotheosis of a Pliceman* (*Apofeoz Militsanera*) cycle in his self-embodiment as the official keeper of peace and public order and a mythical cult figure once again draws attention to the fact that his intention was not merely to quote linguistic or stylistic patterns, but also to appropriate intonation patterns.

He's alive, he's among us as before
That knight, who was sung about by
Lilienkron, and later by Rilke
And later—only I did dare

Here he's going to his strict post
The Pliceman in his region
And I sing of him in ecstasy
And don't pass my lyre on

Он жив, он среди нас как прежде
Тот рыцарь, коего воспел
Лилиенкрон, а после Рильке
А после – только я посмел

Вот он идет на пост свой строгий
Милицанер в своем краю
И я пою его в восторге
И лиры не передаю. (1997, 154)



Now we'll talk about Rome
How ancient Roman Cicero
To enemy of the people Cataline
The people, tradition and the law

¹⁵ See, for example, the following audio recordings of the "Mantra of High Russian Culture" ("Mantra vysokoi russkoi kul'tury"): *Tri "O" i odin Prigov*, Moscow: CHOR Music, 2001; and *Sound Art*, Bremen: Weserburg – Museum für moderne Kunst, 2007, 2 Audio-CDs.

Juxtaposed as an example
 To that visible stateliness
 And in our day the Pliceman
 Stands up as equally worthy Rome
 And furthermore—to the invisible
 He rises as a visible example
 Of stateliness

Теперь поговорим о Риме
 Как древнеримский Цицерон
 Врагу народа Катилине
 Народ, преданье и закон
 Противпоставил как пример
 Той государственности зримой
 А в наши дни Милицанер
 Встает равнодостоинным Римом
 И дальше больше – той незримой
 Он зримый высится пример
 Государственности. (164)



Look up there's the Heavenly Power
 And here below is—the Pliceman
 And in this instance now, for example
 A conversation between them occurs
 What are you conveying, Heavenly Power?—
 Why are you standing there, Pliceman?—
 What do you see, Heavenly Power?—
 What have you thought up, Pliceman?—
 Fly by, then, Heavenly Power!—
 Stand there, stand still, Pliceman!
 Keep an eye out, Heavenly Power!—
 Only there is no answer for him.

Вот сверху там Небесная Сила
 А внизу здесь вот –Милицанер
 Вот какой в этот раз, например
 Разговор между них происходит:
 Что несешься, Небесная Сила?—
 Что стоишь ты там, Милицанер?—
 Что ты видишь, Небесная Сила?—
 Что замыслил ты, Милицанер?—
 Проносишь же, Небесная Сила!—

Стой же, стой себе, Милицанер!–
 Наблюдай же, Небесная Сила!–
 Только нету ответа ему. (165)¹⁶

Prigov's choice of performance venues—his own apartment in Beliaev—was a concrete expression of his position *on the margins*, i.e., in a peripheral artistic subculture. As he himself expressed it, the apartment—his intimate living environment—became the base for contact between the poet and his people, a place of assembly for a large number of voices and styles which the author distilled as a medium. Prigov's elocution encompasses the entire spectrum of reading modes from Boris Eikhenbaum's typology: the declamatory/rhetorical (*deklamativnyi/ritoricheskii*), the melodic (*napevnyi*), and the conversational (*govornyi*) type of intonation.¹⁷

Eikhenbaum considered intonationally diversified speech a characteristic of stage declamation. With Prigov, however, it is not empathetic approximation of the given situation—a feature typical of stage declamation—that we observe, but a process of converging with and diverging from the appropriated intonations. Here stage declamation is virtually defamiliarized by “chamber declamation,” as the oral realization consistently refers to the text Prigov holds in his hands. In his reading, he makes deliberate use of *readymade* intonations.

The oral recitation of the *Militsaner* cycle can thus also be understood as a reaction to the Soviet praxis of reading aloud. As in Soviet mainstream poetry, this cycle is based—if with ironic intent—on a metrically bound, rhymed verse form, and, as a quoted performative pattern, this serves the purpose of a now lofty, now intimately confidential, now didactically edifying intonation.¹⁸ For Prigov, an important impulse for taking Soviet recitation patterns as an orientation is the endeavor to demonstrate the voice of power, as broadcast primarily by the official mass media, by adapting it—only to distance himself from it again in virtually the same breath.

The targeted employment of various intonations requires a high degree of artistic mastery. Above and beyond any institutional training, Prigov developed his own quite virtuoso voice technique. Here the appropriation of foreign intonations is not limited merely to a cold, indifferent game. On the contrary, it becomes manifest in Prigov's unmistakable voice with its silvery timbre. It is this strong, clear voice and its wide spectrum of modulation that provides the sound box in which the foreign voices resound.

¹⁶ The video recording was released in Hirt and Wonders 1987.

¹⁷ In her study of Vladimir Sorokin's reading performances, Drubek-Meyer compares Sorokin's and Prigov's performances and in that context draws attention to Boris Eikhenbaum's intonation typology (Drubek-Meyer 1999). On this subject, see Eikhenbaum 1969, 8.

¹⁸ On the tradition of Soviet elocution, see Verkhovskii 1950 and Artobolevskii 1959.

Whereas Aleksandr Blok's voice attracted special interest among the researchers of the modern era on account of its inherent contradiction "between the natural intonation of emotional speech and declamational demands" (*mezhdu estestvennoi intonatsiei emotsional'noi rechi i deklamatsionnymi trebovaniiami*; Bernshtein 1972, 498). Prigov's voice, with its ability to appropriate a wide range of intonational readymades and its *personal* playful oscillation between identification and alienation, can be considered an example of the voice of the postmodern poet.

Text translated by Judith Rosenthal

Poems translated by Gerald Janecek

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